

On writers, languages and Ghalib: The 19th SAARC Writers' Conference, 3-4 April

KHADEMUL ISLAM

How apt, I thought when I was invited to Delhi to attend the 19th SAARC writers' conference. This would be my first time at the conference, and Delhi had literary associations for me.

Throughout my school years in Karachi Urdu literature had been a burden. I found the masters, Sauda, Mir Taqi Mir, Mir Dard, Zauq, Bahadur Shah Zafar, Mir Hasan, Ghalib of course, the later Akbarabadi and Hali insufferable, their *shairs* and couplets steeped in bitter romanticism, fatalism, and resignation. Matters were not helped either by our Urdu teacher: ancient 'Zahir Sir', nicknamed by us cruel schoolboys as 'Buddha Zahir', or 'Old Man Zahir'. In class, he held the Urdu textbook so close to his near-blind eyes that it covered his face, and mumbled, so that we had to strain hard to know the difference between the *ghazal*, *qasida*, *masnavi* and *marasyia*.

He would talk about the old imperial Delhi—the city of decaying Mughals and cockfights, the rise of Urdu amid the fall of Persian, the historical context of Ghalib's work. It was largely wasted on us. We schoolboys were masters of rote, memorizing the *shairs* and spitting out the formulaic answers at exam time.

In October 1972 we fled from Pakistan to Bangladesh via Afghanistan and India. We stayed in Delhi for a week. And it was with a slow burn of recognition that I surveyed the remains of Mughal Delhi: Humayun's tomb, the Red Fort, the Jama Masjid, the crammed *gullies* of Chandni Chowk with its stacked pomegranates and *chust* accents. Standing on the ramparts of the Red Fort (visitors were allowed back then) I could see *Muallam e Urdu*, the neighbourhoods around the old court that was the birthplace of standard Urdu. From where Ghalib's *Dastambu* records that nobleman and commoner alike had fled from British massacres after the 1857 Sepoy Revolt, and where I, on the run myself, between old, vanished certainties and an unknown future, now remembered Mir's lonely lines about the futility of love in this universe. As old schoolboy-rote *shairs* dimly re-kindled in my head, I wished that I had made more of an effort to listen what an old man in a Karachi schoolroom had been trying so hard to tell us.

Four of us from Bangladesh attended the conference: writer Syed Shamsul Haq, professor and poet Kaiser Haq, poet Nirmalendu Goon, and myself. We stayed at



Front row, second from right: Syed Shamsul Haq, Kishwar Naheed, Nilima Haque, Nirmalendu Goon. Back row: S.T.Hettige, Khademul Islam

the India International Center, a clubby complex of conference buildings, guest houses and restaurants within easy reach of the shops at Greater Kailash, Connaught Place or Khan Market. I bunked in a double room with Kaiser, and having him for a cellmate meant an addictive stream of literary adda, as well as companionable book-buying sorties. Our hosts, led by the bubbly Dr. Reena Marwah, took excellent care of us. Breakfasts were in a dining room overlooking the Lodhi Gardens, and on the first morning there we ran into Abhi Subedi, the Nepalese poet, raconteur and member of the Nepalese chapter of FOSWAL (Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature). After breakfast the three of us walked through the still-temperate Delhi air to the main conference hall, where writers and poets from eight countries (Afghanistan having been invited this time to join the SAARC seven) were arriving and greeting each other.

The inaugural session, where delegates from the seven SAARC countries gave their opening addresses, set the tone for the conference. Mahaswati Devi, who had been awarded the one-lakh rupee SAARC literary award, called to say that in view of the Nandigram she would not be able to come but would be delighted to receive the check which she was donating to the victims of the police shootings. Syed Shamsul Haq in his speech said he brought greetings from Bangladesh and spoke about the contribution of our war of liberation on the nation's literature. Generally, the speeches tended to hew closely to the official SAARC line of stressing commonalities, of promoting peace

and friendship, of broad civilizational affinities and the need for greater 'connectivity', with the writers' conference emphasizing the common frame of the subcontinent's prose and poetry, the intimate idiom of the arts and freer flow of artists, writers, literati, poets, and academics across borders. Though this argument could get tiresome when couched in flowery phrases, which some at the conference mistook for literary language, the basic truth of the proposition was undeniable. SAARC has not taken off in any real sense due to the subcontinent's history of hostility and mistrust, and which has a way of violently disrupting relations from time to time. Arts and culture offers a way out of it, as was pointed out in the welcoming address by Ajeet Cour, the founder-chairperson of the Academy of Fine Arts and Literature, under whose aegis FOSWAL operates. "Way back in 1987," she told us, "all such initiatives were frowned upon with suspicion. FOSWAL, overcoming bureaucratic snags and political displeasure of the establishment, managed to invite seven eminent Urdu and Punjabi writers from Pakistan to India to interact freely with hundreds of Indian writers and cultural and literary activists to discuss issues of common concern in a 3-day conference in Delhi. It was a tremendously difficult and uphill task, with no support, financial or otherwise, from any quarter." Since then there have been 18 major SAARC writers' conferences in all the SAARC countries, "and with Afghanistan joining SAARC now we shall inshallah be having a conference in Afghanistan very soon." Amen to that, all of us in the hall went!

It was in the afternoon "Readings" session (and the one the next day) that the conference came alive for me. Poets and writers from Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh read their works, often in their own tongue, and the subcontinent's sheer diversity of tongues and languages, of cadence and lit, was brought home to us afresh. Though Anantha Murthy wrote in 'beyond borders', the SAARC journal of literature, that this plurality of *bhashas* "contributes to the richness of the texture of our lives", yet here the Punjabi poet was incomprehensible to the Bengali, the Tamil was lost on the Hindi or the Kashmiri writer, and large swathes of Urdu were met with blank stares by the rest. Conferences such as this highlight the indispensable role of English as a link language in South Asia today. Which was also underlined by the warm reception accorded to Kaiser Haq's poem written in Indian English—participants kept coming up to him to say how much they enjoyed it. Nirmalendu Goon, too, in stark contrast to his Rabindrik look, recited a poem he had written for the occasion—in English! The most impassioned talk was given in the session on the literature of the marginalized (chaired by Pakistani poet Kishwar Naheed) the following day by Ganesh Devy, an English professor who had chucked an academic career in order to work with *adivasis*. I too spoke about my experience as the literary editor of *The Daily Star* of Bangladesh, about English writing in Dhaka vis-a-vis in Delhi, and the dangers inherent in too neatly pigeon-holing literature as either marginal or privileged, which could lead to false distinctions. Here, it has to be said that the conferences could be improved with a change in format, with podium speeches—in fact, speechifying in general—cut in favour of sessions where writers could have more personal exchanges, or extended give-and-take on conference themes and topics.

It was the Hindi and Urdu *shairee* that brought back memories of my first stay in Delhi, as well as vividly demonstrated the power of the mother tongue and the hold of tradition. A *mushaira* (the word means meeting place) atmosphere developed as Hindi/Urdu poet after poet grabbed an expectant audience with the rhythm perfected through centuries amid cries of 'wah, wah, wah.' The very form of the delivery gives poetry the authority of ineffable truth—a notion and practice very different from Western poetic tradition. More than once I thought that Zahir Sir would have been happy to be there! Equally attractive was seeing the conference itself

happily rattle along Eastern lines: proceedings on the stage were frequently joined in by members from the floor. The typical Western conference distance between dais and floor was extravagantly dispensed with here.

And yet later sitting on the lawn sipping tea with the Assamese poets (Nilima Haque, Anis Uz Zaman, Nilim umar) I also was aware that the Assamese and the Oriya languages had to fight long and hard against Bengali linguistic imperialism. We Bangladeshis too had defined ourselves by resisting the imposition of Urdu, while the divide between Hindi and Urdu still reflects communal and national conflict. One of the ways to lessen and modulate these feelings is to get together, to meet in conferences such as these, listen to each other's poetry and verse and see that beneath our different languages we are creatures of the same skin.

As the plane took off late at night from Delhi airport, I looked down at the lights below and thought of that grand old Delhi man of letters, Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib. Asked by a friend what Delhi was like, he wrote back:

"My friend, what a question to ask! Things that keep Delhi alive—the Fort, the daily crowds at the Jama Masjid, the weekly walk to the Junna bridge and the yearly fair of the flower-men (a festival centering around the Qutb Minar)".

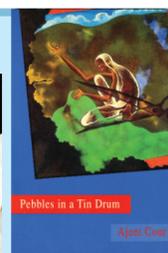
He might have added another: conferences of literary men, who come in peace.

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.

Ajeet Cour

Writing about the 2004 11th SAARC writers' Conference in this page Kaiser Haq had opined that 'Ms Ajeet Cour is a phenomenon, more like a force of nature than a real person.' Having seen her operate up close at the latest writers' conference I can state that his words assuredly were no fiction. In 1975 she single-handedly brought into existence the Academy of Fine Arts and Literature, and then later set up the Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature (or, as tossed around at the conference hall, FOSWAL), which is the body that runs the machinery of literary SAARC, including the writers' conferences. As was comprehensively acknowledged at the meet by various speakers, Ajeet Cour brooks no interference. A splendid example of it was her speech—delivered in crisp Hindi—at the valedictory session on the final day of the conference. Dr. Karan Singh was the chief guest, and while all the other participants were properly deferential towards him, Ajeet Cour reminded the distinguished guest that though he was tipped to be the next president of India, he should be aware of the cocon that presidents find themselves in, that if someone wanted to meet him/she should not be waved away with the dismissive 'he's consulting his rishi, or soothsayer', and that future visitors should not have to face the PAs of PAs of PSs—and there was no doubt in anybody's mind, least of all the future president of India's, which visitor she was so trenchantly forewarning him about.

But there are other sides to this SAARC matriarch, one of which is decidedly the quality of instantly putting people at ease. When on the second and final day, at the end of my morning session, I was introduced to her she just grabbed me and hugged me in an expansive embrace, and referring to my visa delays said, 'Aray,



beta, tum finally agai (You finally showed up)?" I think I had a most foolish grin on my face as I replied "Bilkul, jee haan."

Born in Lahore in 1934, Ajeet Cour, with nineteen books of fiction, a travelogue and an autobiography which won her the Sahitya Akademi award, is well-known in the world of Punjabi fiction. I read the autobiography (*Khana Badosh*, translated by Masooma Ali as 'Pebbles in a Tin Drum') on the plane back to Dhaka. It is an impassioned document. She wrote that one of her earliest memories is of the room she was born in in her grandmother's house in Lahore, whose "wide windows and...door opened onto the terrace towards the street were covered firmly with thick bamboo curtains all the time." Whenever she wanted to open those windows to taste the "rippling breezes and azure skies where the balmy sun floated like will-o'-wisp" her "mother and grandmother would reprimand her, 'Girls do not peep out from behind the bamboo curtains.'"

To watch that girl, forbidden from so many things by the culture she had been born into, grown into the Ajeet Cour that today fearlessly shakes a declaiming reffereing at India's *eminence grises* at SAARC conferences is to appreciate and understand a rare human being who followed her own convictions come what may.

On Hallowed Ground: SAARC Translation Workshop at Belur, Kolkata

KAISER HAQ

After the two days of readings and lectures and cordial colloquy at the SAARC literary meet in Delhi, eleven of us flew to Kolkata for another two-day event: the first ever SAARC Translation Workshop. Daytime

visiting, greatly diminished the travail of intra-city travel.

For six of us, billeted at Chaudhury's Guest House, behind the Maharaja Restaurant in Chowringhee Road, getting to the workshop venue on the hallowed precincts of the Ramakrishna Mission's Bidyamandir (college) in Belur

and Literature) had to stay back in Delhi to nurse her daughter, the artist Arpana Cour, who had just had a by-pass. But her able and ever effervescent lieutenant Dr. Reena Marwah, came for a day, and her co-organizers, the ICCR, sent their high-powered General Secretary, Professor K. Satchinandan. Logistics in Kolkata were in the energetic hands of the local Sahitya Akademi boss, Dr Ram Kumar Mukherjee.

We got off to a brisk start, with the Vice Chancellor of the Mission's newly founded university delivering an entertaining inaugural speech on the pitfalls of translation. An academic session had representatives from all SAARC countries except the Maldives and Afghanistan talk about their national literatures for the benefit of the Bidyamandir's students: Professor Satchinandan from India, Professor Abhi Subedi from Nepal, Dr. Asif Farooqi from Pakistan, Tshering Dorji from Bhutan, Dintithi Karunanayake from Sri Lanka and Yours Truly. After a wholesome and filling lunch that sat amazingly lightly in the stomach we got down to the serious deliberations on a translation project. These were satisfactorily concluded in the morning session the following day, with a resolution to publish five or six volumes of translations of works from

SAARC countries into English every year. In addition there would be translations from one regional language to another.

Let us not forget about our progress there were unpleasant realities impinging on our consciousness. The Pakistani writer Asif Farooqi had only been given a visa to visit Delhi. His two days there had been largely spent on obtaining permission to visit Kolkata as well. And once in Kolkata several hours each day went on finding out to which branch of the Police he had to report to. Still, he and his compatriot, the poet Kishwar Naheed, managed to call on Mahasweta Devi, who had received this year's one lakh rupee SAARC literary award, and promptly donated the entire amount to a fund for the victims of the Nandigram shooting.

But at Chaudhury's in the evenings Ram Kumar turned up with a bottle of Indian Usquebaugh and we gave ourselves up to merry tipping, which offered ready escape from the complexities of life. As we got tight, let our hair down, let it all hang out, and swapped drolleries it seemed this world wasn't such a bad place after all.

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temperatures in the two cities were roughly the same but Delhi was dry, and the enervating effect of Kolkata's high humidity was palpable as soon as we landed. Mercifully, the evenings were still relatively mild, with fugitive breeze playing hide and seek with the city's flaneurs. And a number of new flyovers and elevated roadways, which weren't there the last time I was

was an hour's jaunt. The other five, accommodated at the Mission Guest House, simply toddled over; and we were joined by a literary quartet from Kolkata, among whom were the veteran translators Professor Manabendra Bannerjee and Professor Supriya Chaudhuri. Sadly, Ajeet Cour-ji, the moving spirit behind FOSWAL (the Foundation of SAARC Writers

Farewell Not My Friend

SYED SHAMSUL HAQ

And the long midnight walks with Shamsur Rahman on the Nababpur Street! We returning from our adda on the Stadium gallery still raw with freshly laid concrete, or at the fashionable Kashba restaurant if by chance, on a particular evening, we were rich from our honorarium for poetry published, a meager ten taka perhaps; returning at midnight to our respective residences, saying goodnight at the corner of Victoria Park to meet again the



next morning, perhaps at Beauty Boarding or at Govinda Dham, actually a coal-hole but serving tea on deferred payment; but not taking leave yet, we are not yet ready to leave, wishing the night would be longer, still lingering in the street, still reciting poems in full-throated delivery. If I would recite some lines from Jibanananda, Shamsur Rahman would join in with lines from Duddhadev Basu, and if Shahid Quadri was around on a particular midnight, he would supplement the recital with Amiya Chakravarty to the stars

of the night sky and the bunch of street dogs silently following us from Stadium to the park, the whole length, amused perhaps with our lot but expecting some food that they thought we were carrying in our pockets. If only they knew that it were only poems and slim volumes of poetry with unenrichment for us, but barely even chewable to them...

(Excerpted from Syed Shamsul Haq's tribute to poet Shamsur Rahman in *beyond borders*, SAARC journal of literature, Monsoon 2006)

South Asia

ABHI N. SUBEDI

Rainy morning
tree shadows fall in Arun's living room
soft piano sound mingles with the green
we all sit reading quietly

Suddenly South Asia erupts
In the columns of Asian Age
And The Dawn
a virulent growth of hatred
children born in hate
wrapping nappies with slogans
'when you grow
hurl this atomic toy
at your playmates!'

Says the paper--
the setting sun
is casting elongated rays of hate
over the heads of children
curls on their loving heads
hide the pain of the new sun's rays
tomorrow morning
with the questions--
Is it going to shine?
Is it going to fall?
Is it going to sing with the branches?
And play with the pearls of water in air?
Children's curls
and pouts in lips
don't go with the revulsion they're made to feign
don't go with their nappies and pants
carrying the rallying cry of fire
piano music stops
green shadows
cast in memories
how!

We all look at each other
and the patterns of South Asia
cast on invisible walls!

Abhi N. Subedi is a leading poet of Nepal.

A Feeling

REHMAN RAHI
(translated from Kashmiri by Braj Kachru)

And outside it was fog
And silence,
And cold:
The naked trees didn't have a rag to cover them.
The surrounding mud walls are begging.

I had seen grey ashes on the oven,
And standing
Kaangri-less on the window,
Whenever a shadow moved, down on the road
I felt like asking:
'Hatay, where are you going?
Won't you take me with you?'

There was fog,
And silence,
And cold;
And again, I sat in the corner of the granary.

Kashmiri poet Rehman Rahi, is credited with bringing a modernist idiom to Kashmiri poetry, and has won the Jnanpith and the Sahitya Akademi awards.

A Chicken Poem

NIRMALENDU GOON

We had chicken in the morning flight of Bangladesh Biman
On way to NSCB international airport

And during our stop-over we had chicken again
In the lovely Kolkata airport's passenger lounge, followed by
A cup of hot instant coffee.
Around the afternoon when we flew close to the sky
On way to the Indian capital New Delhi
In the Air Sahara Boeing we were served chicken again
So we had chicken, chicken and chicken all the way
I know you all know this simple story
My story is different from here.
The sexy air hostess of Air Sahara suddenly apologized to us
She said in her sexy voice "our water boiling machine
Is not working properly, so we can't serve you tea or coffee.
We apologize for the inconvenience."
That sad announcement suddenly brought me to my senses
I bowed my head, remained silent for some time--
And then apologized to those chickens for the inconvenience
We caused them and said,
"Forgive O Lord, forgive my little jokes on Thee,
And I will forgive thy big joke on me."
Can anybody from this distinguished gathering of writers exactly
say
How many eggs we break and boil in hot water,
And how many chickens we slaughter every day.

Nirmalendu Goon is a well-known Bangladeshi poet. The above poem was written and read out at the 19th SAARC writers' conference, April 3, in Delhi.